Young Children and Music: The Prekindergarten Years

Music and young children are the best of friends. They’re almost inseparable! Children love to sing and play instruments, move, create, and respond to music in all sorts of interesting ways. Children sing while they play—both familiar songs and new creations of their own. They twirl and rock and move to music every chance they get. They are curious about sound and sound sources and just the sight of rhythm instruments makes young children’s eyes light up, smiles emerge, and cries of “I want to play” ring out. Music and children just naturally go together.

The years before children enter kindergarten are critical ones for children’s overall growth and development and especially significant for their music growth and development. Those who work (and play) with children in nursery schools and child-care centers have the joyful responsibility to welcome children to their music classroom and provide experiences and create opportunities that will open and expand the exciting world of music to them. These youngsters are open to all kinds of music and will benefit from a musically rich environment—with an adult who shows enjoyment of the music. As children continue their musical experiences in kindergarten and progress through elementary school, these early musical experiences will serve as the foundation for expanding their musical understanding and help them become musical children.

Children need a rich musical environment in which to grow. Teachers and caregivers must nurture their growth in these important first years of their lives and create developmentally appropriate music experiences that take place in a child-initiated and -directed, but teacher-supported play environment. Everything we know about young children tells us that they learn through play and pretend.

Young Children and Music Learning

1. All children have musical potential.
2. Children bring their own unique interest and abilities to the music-learning environment.
3. Very young children are capable of developing critical thinking skills through musical ideas.
4. Children come to early childhood music experiences from diverse backgrounds.
5. Children should experience exemplary musical sounds, activities, and materials.
6. Children should not be encumbered with the need to meet performance goals.
7. Children’s play is their work.
8. Children learn best in pleasant physical and social environments.
9. Diverse learning environments are needed to serve the developmental needs of many individual children.
10. Children need effective adult models.

When planning early childhood musical experiences, there are important considerations to keep in mind regarding young children and music learning. In the preceding position statement on early childhood education developed by MENC, The National Association for Music Education, ten considerations are articulated.

The belief that all children have musical potential is especially significant given that the psychologist Howard Gardner suggests that music is one of the first intelligences to develop (Gardner, 1993/1983). Gardner also asserts that if a potential intelligence is not nurtured, it may not develop. This puts a great responsibility on teachers, parents, and caregivers of young children to provide musical experiences that will nurture their musical potential.

INFANTS AND MUSIC

While we have all observed that most babies coo, babble, or move to music, there is evidence that musical responses begin even before the baby is born. During the fifth month of pregnancy, the fetus can hear voices and music, move in rhythm to music, and react (by kicking) to loud noises—and even be disturbed by rock music (Whitwell and Riddell, 1991:1). The newborn recognizes the rhythm, pitch, and expression of the mother’s voice and distinguishes it from other female voices (Fox, 1991:43). When a mother has provided prenatal music experiences (during the third trimester) by singing or by playing music, the newborn shows accelerated development: the infant will be remarkably attentive, will accurately imitate sounds made by parents and nonfamily members, and will show superior gross and fine motor skills (Lafuente, 1996:151). In view of such findings, it is obviously never too early to begin music experiences!

Some guidelines for involving infants and toddlers in beginning music experiences include:

1. singing and chanting to them, using songs and rhymes representing a variety of meters and tonalities
2. imitating the sounds infants make
3. exposing them to a wide variety of vocal, body, instrumental, and environmental sounds
4. providing exposure to selected live and recorded music
5. rocking, patting, touching, and moving with the children to the beat, rhythm patterns, and melodic direction of music they hear
6. providing safe toys that make musical sounds the children can control
7. talking about music and its relationship to expression and feeling

(From The School Music Program: A New Vision. Copyright © 1994 by Music Educators National Conference. Used by permission.)

MUSICAL EXPERIENCES FOR TWO-, THREE-, AND FOUR-YEAR-OLDS

Prekindergarten children enjoy all kinds of music activities—singing, playing instruments, creating music, responding to music through listening and movements—and, as a result, they develop important understandings about music. When the National Standards for Music Education were developed in 1994, music educators decided that it was critical not only to identify what kindergarten through grade 12 students should know and be able to do but also what prekindergarten children can learn and demonstrate. Therefore, four Content Standards for Prekindergarten are specified in the National Standards for Music Education and are identified in the list on the next page. These standards are intended for age four and the achievement standards for each prekindergarten content standard are presented in Appendix A. As preschool teachers and caregivers plan music experiences in the four areas specified by the standards, some background information on each and suggested activities follow.
How do children learn to sing? By singing! Teachers and caregivers need to sing with and to young children every day—throughout the day. The songs can be “real” ones or ones created to fit an activity such as moving children from one activity to another. Singing need not occur just at circle time, for example, but can be incorporated at different times throughout the day. Singing should be frequent, singing should be playful, and singing should be fun.

What kinds of songs should young children sing? Ones that are short and simple, have repetitive parts, include only a few pitches, and are sung in the range of the young child’s voice. Numerous nursery rhymes and folk songs abound to delight young children in early singing experiences.

While some young children will be able to sing songs in tune, others will only be able to approximate the ups and downs of the melodies. With frequent singing experiences and lots of praise and encouragement from adults, most children will become successful singers.

To better understand how children ranging in age from three months to five years develop singing skills, several developmental stages and suggested activities are illustrated in the following chart.

**Developmental Stages in Singing (3 months to 5 years)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Developmental Stage</th>
<th>Suggested Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3 mo.</td>
<td>Matches pitches sung by mother</td>
<td>Sing while rocking/bouncing baby to beat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3–9 mo.</td>
<td>Babbles on a few pitches; joins in singing with mother or caregiver</td>
<td>Sing, move hands and feet, imitate baby’s sounds; chant nursery rhymes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9–18 mo.</td>
<td>Develops speech; repeats what is heard</td>
<td>Sing fragments and child responds; encourage sing-alongs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 mo.–2 yrs.</td>
<td>Sings more pitches; makes up songs</td>
<td>Repeat same songs often; encourage made-up songs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2–3 yrs.</td>
<td>Sings familiar song parts; identifies familiar songs; enjoys singing games</td>
<td>Sing songs and chants to and with child; play singing games</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3–4 yrs.</td>
<td>Sings whole songs; can begin small-group work</td>
<td>Sing songs within five or six pitches; provide small-group music activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4–5 yrs.</td>
<td>Sings with more accurate pitch and rhythm; echoes tonal patterns</td>
<td>Build song repertoire; encourage expressive singing and chanting with rhymes and stories</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Try this sample singing activity to engage young children in exploring their singing voice (and speaking voice). Children need lots of opportunities to explore their many voices.
Books illustrating familiar children’s songs serve as an excellent way to engage children in comparing their singing voices with their speaking voices. In addition to the “Miss Mary Mack” book, books illustrating songs such as “Eensy Weensy Spider,” “Mary Had a Little Lamb,” “If You’re Happy,” and “The Farmer in the Dell” are excellent choices for this activity. Children should have time to independently look through (and sing) these books.

Here’s a way to introduce one of these books:

1. Read the book *Miss Mary Mack* to children engaging them in discussing the pictures and the story as you read. Children will love to join in on the repeated words at the end of each line.
2. On another day, read the book again noting that you are using your speaking voice to tell the story.
3. Sing the story or use the CD track 18 of the song to tell the story with a singing voice. Then, invite children to use their singing voices to sing the story with you.
4. Make the book (and CD) available in an area where children can enjoy the book and speak and sing the story on their own.

### Playing Instruments

Little ones love to explore all kinds of sound sources—pots and pans, body sounds, found materials. You name it—they love to try it out and see and hear what it sounds like! Instruments are a natural delight. It does not take much to spark a young child’s
interest in playing instruments. Offering lots of opportunities for children to experiment independently and in group settings with a variety of sound sources and simple classroom instruments is an important part of the prekindergarten musical experience and starts them on the path to becoming active music makers.

In these early years, children should become acquainted with both nonpitched instruments such as woodblocks and rhythm sticks and pitched instruments such as xylophones and glockenspiels. They need to get to know each instrument, just as they would get to know a new friend. Before long, they will be adding sound sources to represent different activities in a story, accompanying a song with a rhythm instrument, and figuring out how to play simple melodies or patterns from melodies by ear on a pitched instrument.

To better understand how children ranging in age from nine months to five years develop instrumental skills, several sample developmental stages and suggested activities for playing instruments follow.

**Developmental Stages in Playing Instruments (9 months to 5 years)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Developmental Stage</th>
<th>Suggested Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9 mo.–2 yrs.</td>
<td>Loves to explore sounds</td>
<td>Make available simple percussion instruments for sound exploration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2–3 yrs.</td>
<td>Improvises on simple percussion instruments</td>
<td>Provide a variety of percussion instruments for children to explore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3–4 yrs.</td>
<td>Echoes a rhythm with rhythm sticks; explores various ways to make sounds on instruments; begins to develop eye-hand coordination</td>
<td>Accompany singing with instruments; provide opportunities for instrument and sound exploration; play mallet and percussion instruments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4–5 yrs.</td>
<td>Explores a variety of percussion instruments; plays and improvises accompaniments to songs and stories; plays simple melodies on instruments</td>
<td>Classify and group percussion instruments by type; add instruments to songs and stories; make available instruments for creating and playing melodies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A sample activity for engaging children in a musical experience using classroom instruments follows.

**Prekindergarten Playing Instruments Activity: “Hickory, Dickory, Dock!”**

- **Prek Standard 1c:** Children experiment with a variety of instruments and other sound sources.
- **Prek Standard 3c:** Children participate freely in music activities.
- **Rhyme:** “Hickory, Dickory, Dock!”
- **Materials:** Instruments such as a triangle, small glockenspiel, wood block.

Rhymes and songs suggest all kinds of opportunities for children to experiment with a variety of instruments. (A collection of rhymes is included in Appendix B.) Here’s a way to involve children in choosing instruments to accompany the familiar Mother Goose rhyme “Hickory, Dickory, Dock!”

Hickory, dickory, dock!
The mouse ran up the clock,
The clock struck one,
The mouse ran down,
Hickory, dickory, dock!
1. Expressively, chant the rhyme for children. Then, have them echo as you say one line at a time.

2. Suggest that adding instruments might make the rhyme more special. Help them verbalize what sounds might be suggested by the words (clock striking one o’clock, mouse running up, mouse running down, ticking of clock).

3. Invite children to experiment and choose instruments to add to the rhyme, for example, a triangle could be used for the clock striking one o’clock, a glockenspiel for the running up and running down, and a wood block for the ticking clock.

4. Have them take turns playing the instruments while the others chant the rhyme.

5. Create a chart of the rhyme that includes the words and pictures of the instruments they’ve chosen. Place the picture chart and the instruments in the music center for children to explore on their own.

**Creating Music**

Young children love to invent little “singsongs” or tunes to accompany their play. They are intrigued by making up new words for familiar songs, improvising on simple classroom instruments, creating dramatizations to songs, making up accompaniments to songs, and moving expressively to music they hear. Being a creator comes naturally to prekindergarten children. Creativity in young children must be nurtured. Teachers and caregivers need to provide lots of time and settings for children to be able to explore and express themselves in new ways—both alone and with others.

Let children try creating their own music with the following activity using a book such as *Jazz Fly* as a springboard for improvisation.
Improvising (or making up music extemporaneously) is an important element of jazz and comes quite naturally to children. Stories, poems, and songs can serve as motivators for children to show off their creativity. Here’s a way to set the stage for a creative activity.

1. After having read *Jazz Fly* (or a similar story) numerous times to children, review it again involving them in making the sounds of the different animals and insects and filling in as much of the story line as they can.

2. Tell children that they are going to have a chance to play like the Jazz Bugs. Designate where in the room (a music corner or center) the Jazz Club will be and tell them that they will be able to go there during free play time and make up their own jazzy music. Show them the instruments that they will be able to use and remind them that they will need to take turns visiting the Jazz Club.

3. On other days, children will enjoy listening to the CD that accompanies the book.

### Responding to Music

One of the most natural ways preschool children respond to and learn about music is through movement. Music without movement is nearly impossible for young children—they listen with their whole bodies and physically experience the music.

Children need multiple opportunities to experience fundamental movements such as walking, marching, running, hopping, jumping, and sliding to music. As they develop these motor skills, they learn about their bodies. Through finger plays, songs, chants, and games, they clap their hands, wiggle fingers, and tap their feet—all ways to explore and move their bodies.

Creative movement activities also provide young children an exploratory means for expressing themselves. After gaining experience with fundamental movements to music, it will be easier for children to interpret creatively what they hear in the music.

As with all musical experiences, teachers and caregivers must plan movement activities appropriate for the developmental stages of young children. Some suggested developmental stages and activities for movement are highlighted in the following chart.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Developmental Stage</th>
<th>Suggested Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9 mo.–2 yrs.</td>
<td>Imitates rhythmic responses; tries to keep beat; walks and runs</td>
<td>Play music and move child’s feet and hands to beat or rhythm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2–3 yrs.</td>
<td>Walks, hops, jumps; claps to rhythm</td>
<td>Match drumbeat to child’s movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3–4 yrs.</td>
<td>Tiptoes; enjoys playing singing games; echoes rhythmic patterns with clapping</td>
<td>Teach finger plays, action songs, and easy singing games; clap patterns for children to echo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4–5 yrs.</td>
<td>Walks, runs, gallops, and slides to music; begins to skip</td>
<td>Offer opportunities for marching, walking, and galloping to music</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Since young children delight in finger plays, try the following activity using the familiar “Eensy Weensy Spider.”

**Prekindergarten Movement Activity: “Eensy Weensy Spider”**

| Prek Standard 4b: | Children move to demonstrate awareness of the elements of music (form and expressive qualities). |
| Prek Standard 3c: | Children participate freely in music activities. |
| **Song:** | “Eensy Weensy Spider,” p. 000. |
| **Materials:** | A storybook about this song is listed in Appendix C. |

Since young children love finger plays, there are numerous ones included in Appendix B. Most can be performed while sitting and using only finger and arm movements. Early childhood specialist John Feierabend suggests that children will be more successful if they learn the motions (or finger play) first, and then, learn the rhyme or song. As they perform the motions with “Eensy Weensy Spider,” they will be repeating motions that match the repeating phrases.

Try the following introduction for the “Eensy Weensy Spider” finger play:

1. With children seated, teach the motions for each line of “Eensy Weensy Spider” (but don’t say or sing the words!).
   - **Line 1:** Touch fingertips of both hands and wiggle fingers moving upward.
   - **Line 2:** Separate hands wiggling fingers downward ending with crossed hands in front and quickly separated.
   - **Line 3:** Touch hands above head slowly separating and moving downward.
   - **Line 4:** Same movements as line 1.
2. When children are comfortable with the motions, sing the song or speak the rhyme for the children as they do the motions—no singing or speaking on their part. Repeat several times.
3. On another day, after children have become very familiar with hearing the song and performing the motions, engage them in singing (or speaking) too.

### Understanding Music

Prekindergarten children often understand more than they can tell, and comprehend many music concepts, especially when presented in a comparative context. For example, young children can readily identify concepts such as fast and slow tempos, loud and soft dynamics, long and short sounds, and same and different phrases. They can also identify steady beats, various instruments, and a number of other musical concepts. Once they have experiences exploring these concepts, they will be ready to describe the differences using the appropriate words.

**Prekindergarten Music Concept Activity: “Boogie-Woogie Walk”**

| Prek Standard 4b: | Children move to demonstrate awareness of the elements of music (fast and slow tempos). |
| Prek Standard 3c: | Children participate freely in music activities. |
| **Music:** | “Boogie-Woogie Walk” by Spencer, CD track 9. |

There are many listening selections included on the book’s CD that can engage children in demonstrating their understanding of music concepts. An example for helping children discover and move to music that has both fast and slow tempos follows.

1. Ask children to show how a turtle moves very slowly. Then, have them move quickly like a bird flying through the air. Change back and forth between the fast/slow movements to make certain all children understand the concept.
2. Invite children to show that they hear the fast and slow parts played by the piano in “Boogie-Woogie Walk” (CD track 9). Play the recording and encourage them by modeling, if needed, when to move slowly and when to move fast.

3. If children’s interest is high, repeat this movement activity observing how well children are responding to the tempo changes in the music.

THE PREKINDERGARTEN MUSICAL ENVIRONMENT

In order to provide a rich musical environment in which young children can grow (and play), the prekindergarten environment must be well-equipped, child accessible, and inviting. A variety of materials, equipment, and facilities are needed to accomplish this. Recommendations for what is needed follows.

Materials, Equipment, and Facilities

1. A high-quality sound reproduction system is important for helping students hear music at its best. Recordings of a wide variety of music styles and cultures should be accessible to each teacher.

2. A variety of classroom instruments such as rhythmic (drums), melodic (xylophones), and harmonic (Autoharps® and Chromaharps®) should be accessible for classroom use.

3. Every room in which music is taught should be equipped with children’s books containing songs and with other instructional materials in music.

4. Every prekindergarten classroom should have an open area large enough to accommodate the largest group of children taught and to provide ample space for creative and structured movement activities.

5. Every prekindergarten should have a music center or similar area where children can interact with musical materials and listen to music with headphones.

(Music Centers)

In addition to space for large group activities, prekindergarten children need space for individual and small-group activities. A music corner or separate music centers, as recommended in #5 in the preceding list, serve as an excellent choice to nurture individual learning and musical play.

A music corner can include a variety of musical materials for exploration: a CD player (with headphones) and CDs for listening, a CD-ROM-compatible computer and music-related CD-ROMs, books about songs, instruments, and other music-related materials. Or alternatively, individual music centers can be created if space allows.

Some ideas for four individual music centers follow.

1. The listening center should include a “childproof” CD player with an individual headset, recordings, and picture books about the recorded pieces, or about instruments used in the music on the CD.

2. A singing center could include picture books of familiar stories so the child can “sing the story,” using her or his own melodies. (A soft armchair in this area would be an added plus!) Available hand puppets might encourage a youngster to create a song-story about a particular puppet.

3. The movement center may be stocked with items such as hats or scarves that children can use in moving to recorded music or their own singing. (Clear boundaries should separate this area from the others.)

4. An exploration center for creative activities might include a large “sound box” of cardboard or plywood that is outfitted on the inside with chimes, small percussion instruments, and a xylophone. The exploration center provides a private space for improvising.

Teachers need to devise techniques for managing the classroom activities while using music centers. For example, decide on a signal that means “stop and listen” such
as flicking the light switch, or playing a “signal song” on the piano. Be sure children know how many children can use each center at the same time, and how (and where) they will wait for their “turn.” Keep in mind that the teacher must circulate around the room, not spending too much time at individual centers. With good planning and organization the music centers will be a favorite activity for the children and teacher alike, and musical play will be truly “musical.”

**Recommended Time Allocation for Music**

In the prekindergarten setting, music should be integrated into the curriculum throughout the day. There should be time allocated regularly for large- and small-group activities as well as for individual interaction with musical materials. At least 12 percent of the contact time with children should be devoted to musical experiences. These experiences should include singing, playing instruments, listening to music, creating music, and moving to music.


**Summary of “Young Children and Music: The Prekindergarten Years”**

It is never too early to bring children in touch with music. All children have musical potential, and prekindergarteners learn best through play: singing, playing instruments, and moving to the music they hear. Music activities need to happen every day, and throughout each day, because young children need repetition to learn—and to enjoy—music. If parents, caregivers, and teachers encourage developmentally appropriate musical experiences, prekindergarten children and music can become “the best of friends.”

**References**


Section 1 • Music Learning and Young Children


Resources for the Early Childhood Music Curriculum


Resources for Prekindergarten Music Activities in Musical Children

Finger Plays, Appendix B

“Elephant”
“I’m a Little Teapot”
“Little Mousie”
“Pat-a-Cake, Pat-a-Cake”
“Two Little Blackbirds”

Mother Goose Rhymes, Appendix B

“Doctor Foster”
“Hickory, Dickory, Dock!”
“Humpty Dumpty”
“Jack and Jill”
“Jack Be Nimble”
“Little Miss Muffet”

Chants, Appendix B

“Cobbler, Cobbler”
“Engine, Engine,” p. 000
“Five Little Monkeys”
“Oliver Twist,” p. 000
“One Potato”
“Pease Porridge Hot”
“Teddy Bear”
“Two, Four, Six, Eight”

Songs

“A-Tisket, A-Tasket,” p. 000
“Alphabet Song,” p. 000
“Bingo,” p. 000, CD track 14
“Bye, Baby Bunting,” p. 000
“Counting Chant,” p. 000
“Do as I’m Doing,” p. 000
“Eena, Deena,” p. 000
“Eensy Weensy Spider,” p. 000
“Engine, Engine,” p. 000
“Farmer in the Dell, The,” p. 000
“Follow Me,” p. 000
“Frog in the Millpond,” p. 000
“Good Night, Sleep Tight,” p. 000
“Head, Shoulders, Baby,” p. 000, CD track 21
“Here Comes Valerie,” p. 000, CD track 4
“If You’re Happy,” p. 000, CD track 1
“In and Out,” p. 000
“Lemonade,” p. 000
“London Bridge,” p. 000
“Lucy Locket,” p. 000
“Miss Mary Mack,” p. 000, CD track 18
“Old MacDonald Had a Farm,” p. 000
“Pease Porridge Hot,” p. 000
“Rain, Rain,” p. 000
“Riding in the Buggy,” p. 000
“Ring Around the Rosy,” p. 000
“Sally, Go, ’Round the Sun,” p. 000
“Say Your Name,” p. 00
“Seesaw,” p. 000
“Snail, Snail,” p. 000
“Starlight, Starbright,” p. 000

Storybooks About Songs

See list in Appendix C.
Music for Movement

Walking/Marching
“Gigue” from Suite No. 3 in D (Bach), CD track 3 (walking)
“Chinese Dance” from The Nutcracker Suite (Tchaikovsky), CD track 24
“Parade” from Divertissement (Ibert), CD track 6 (marching)
“The Stars and Stripes Forever” excerpt (Sousa), CD track 46 (marching)
“When the Saints Go Marching In,” CD track 35 (marching)

Fast and Slow Movement
“Boogie-Woogie Walk,” (Spencer), CD track 9 (fast and slow)
“The Little Train of the Caipira” from Bachianas Brasileiras No. 2 (Villa-Lobos), CD track 10 (fast and slow)
“Aquarium” from Carnival of the Animals (Saint-Saëns), CD track 27 (mostly slow)
“The Elephant” from Carnival of the Animals (Saint-Saëns), CD track 16 (mostly slow)
Serenade for Wind Instruments excerpt (Mozart), CD track 39 (mostly slow)
“The Aviary” from Carnival of the Animals (Saint-Saëns), CD track 17 (mostly fast)

“Devil’s Dance” from The Soldier’s Tale (Stravinsky), CD track 28 (mostly fast)
“Russian Dance” from The Nutcracker Suite (Tchaikovsky), CD track 23 (mostly fast)

Sliding, Gliding, Swaying
“Aquarium” from Carnival of the Animals (Saint-Saëns), CD track 27
“The Elephant” from Carnival of the Animals (Saint-Saëns), CD track 16
“Rippling Water” excerpt (Vietnam), CD track 44
Serenade for Wind Instruments excerpt (Mozart), CD track 39

Skipping, Jumping, Hopping
“Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks” from Pictures at an Exhibition (Mussorgsky), CD track 13
“Devil’s Dance” from The Soldier’s Tale (Stravinsky), CD track 28
“Kangaroos” from Carnival of the Animals (Saint-Saëns), CD track 31

Videos
See list in Appendix C.

Support Organizations for Early Childhood

Early Childhood Music and Movement Association (ECMMA), www.ecmma.org
Early Childhood News (The Professional Resource for Teachers and Parents), www.earlychildhoodnews.com
ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, www.ericeee.org